

ANSEL ADAMS

“You don’t make a photograph just with a camera. You bring to the act of photography all the pictures you have seen, the books you have read, the music you have heard, the people you have loved.”

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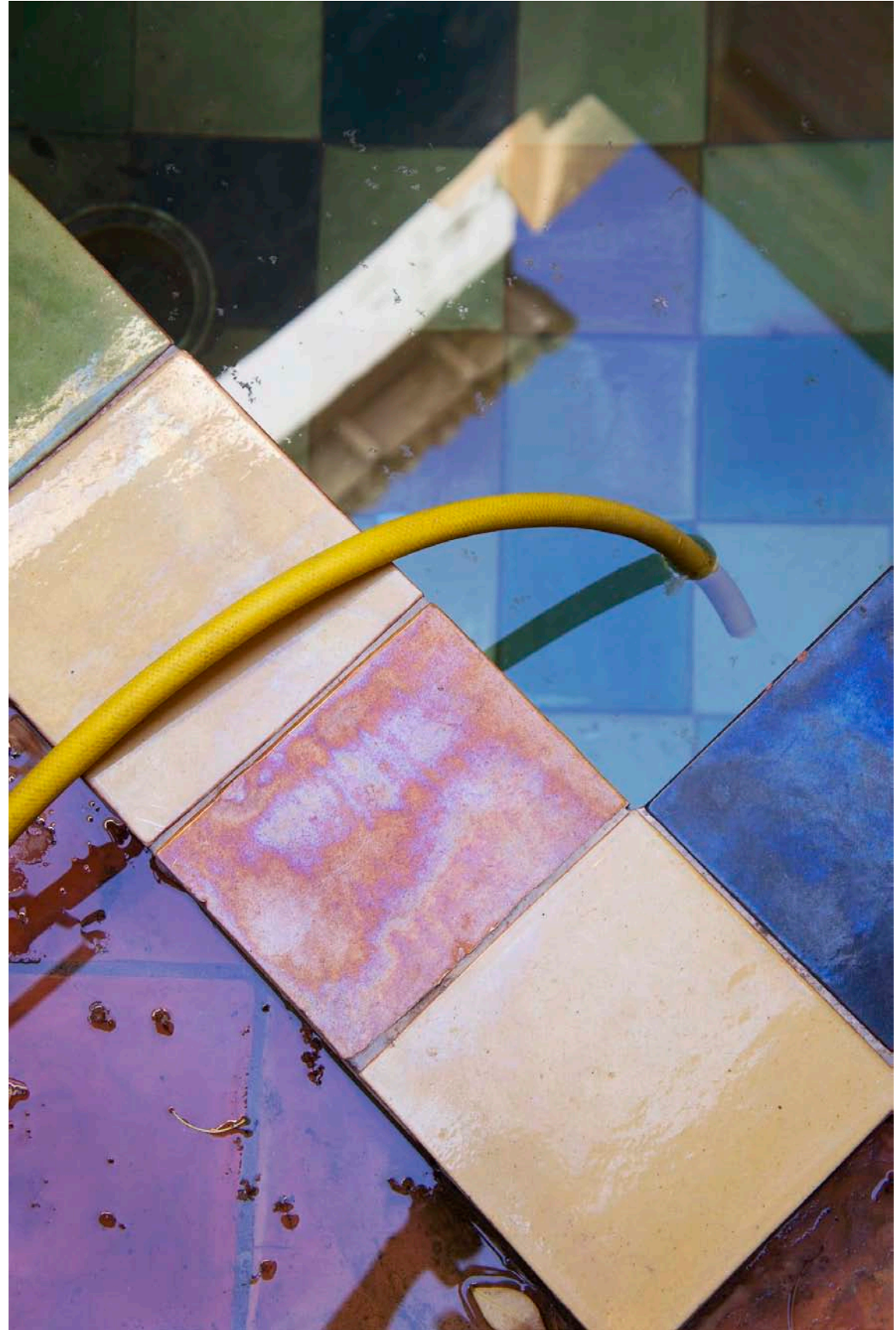
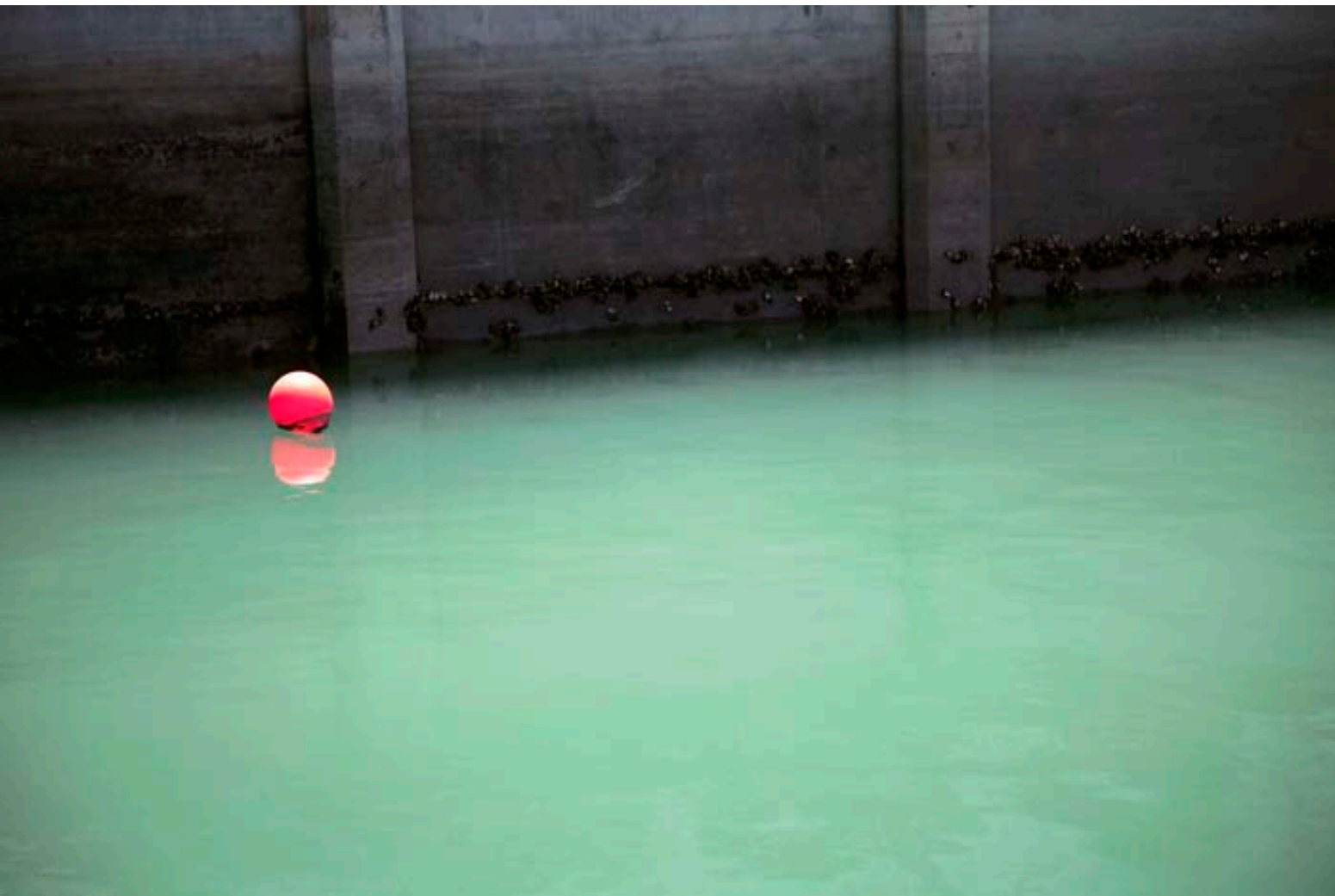
ANNICK LIGTERMOET
De Verontrustende Wereld



ONCE, STILL
AND FOREVER

www.jessicabackhaus.net

Jessica
Backhaus



Sometimes we take a turn and follow a different melody.

Sometimes we feel lost and start all over again.

Sometimes we feel a deep longing for the unknown and simply take the first step.

Once, still and forever is a very personal project for me. It deals again with time... past, present and future. It is a project about our human emotions. Emotions that all of us feel or felt at some point in our lives. My photographs are like a mosaic, a puzzle that celebrates the beauty of ordinary moments often ignored, as well as the residue of loves past and memories forgotten. During the last three years my life has changed quite a bit. In 2009 I have left New York after 14 years and have started a new chapter in Berlin. I went back to my European roots. After leaving New York I felt a symphony of emotions. I stood on the edge of my past, took a step towards my present journey and looked with anticipation, uncertainty and curiosity towards my new future.

I knew that my life was about to change. I was wondering how far do we travel in a lifetime and how I would react to my own country after being gone for 22 years. Life has various chapters and I believe we have to overcome our own fears and celebrate the challenges. Something inside me was broken and at the same time something was alive. I was in the process of searching for a new life within myself.

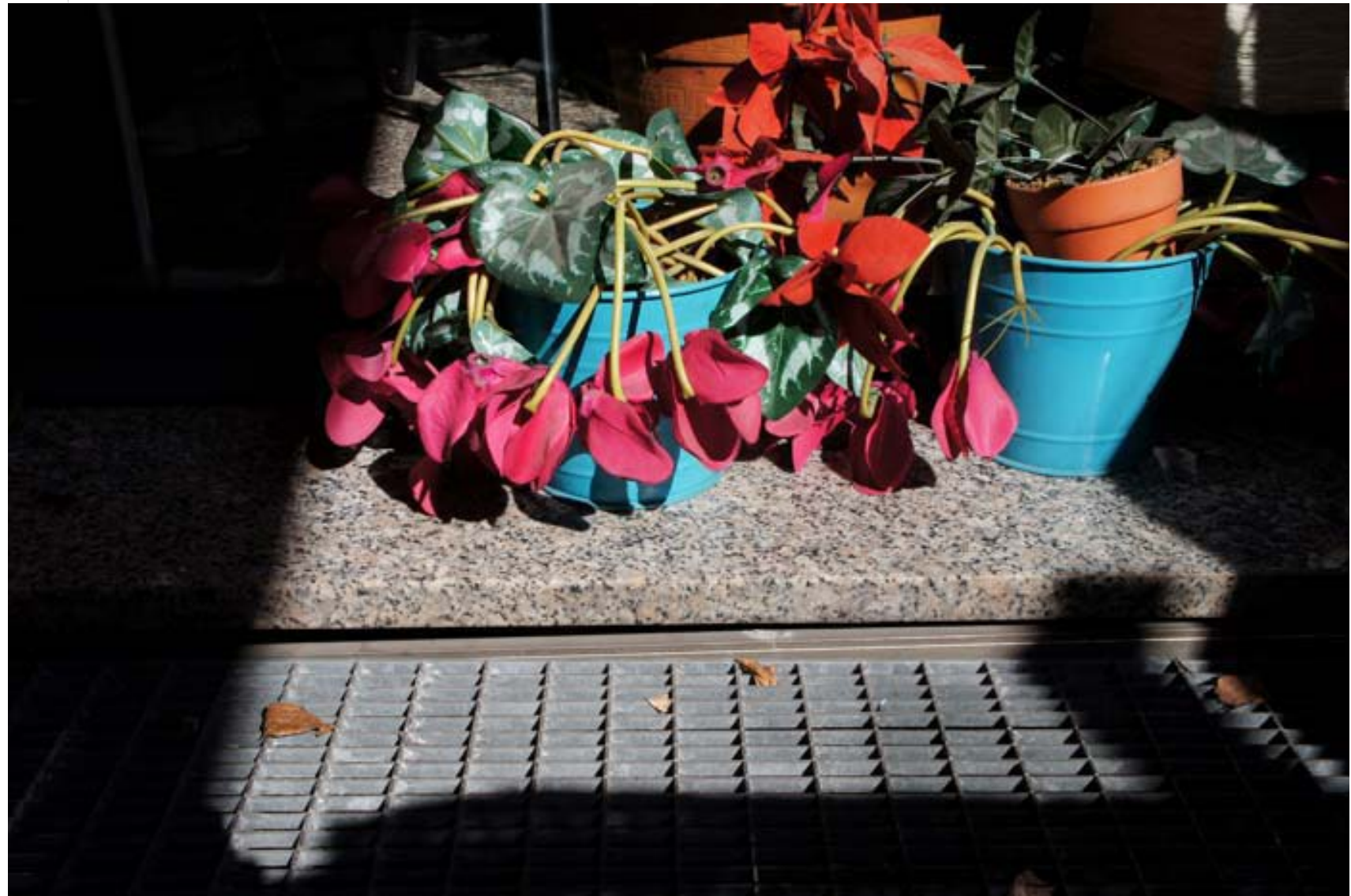
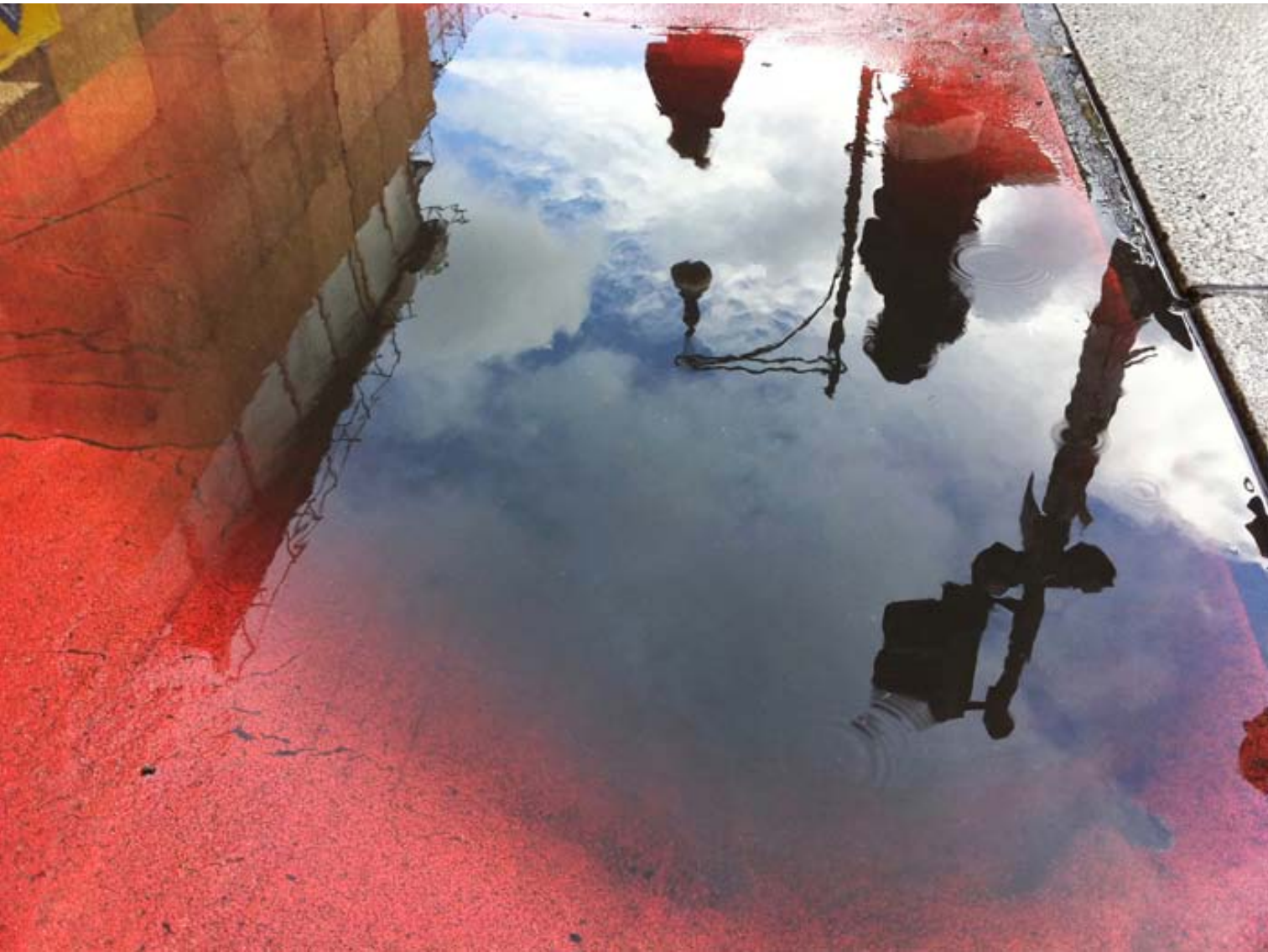
Over the course of the last few years I have experienced pain, loss, grief, loneliness but also wonder, hope, expectations and joy. I learnt that one finds the answers only with time and that difficult times can be as much a gift as happiness.

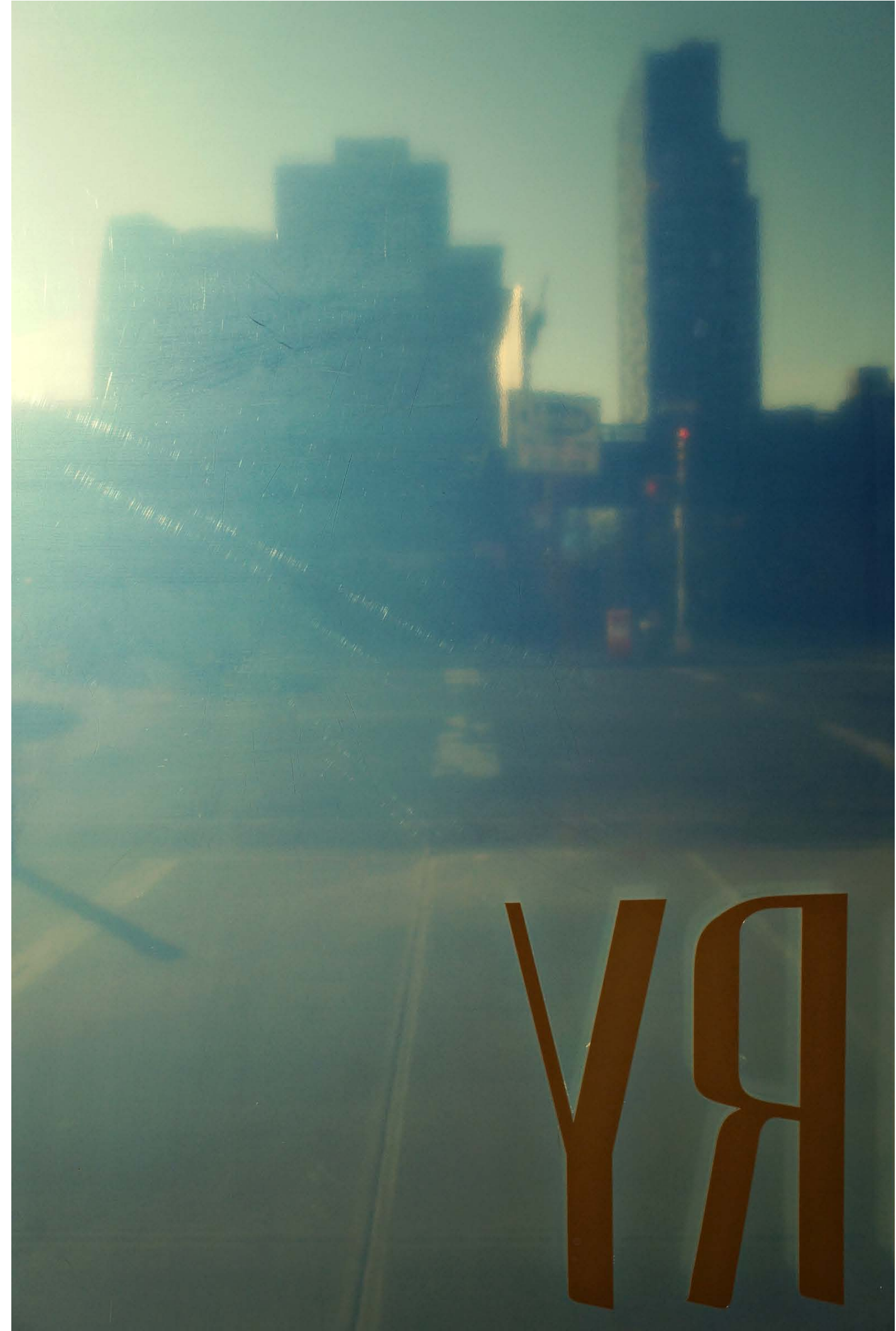
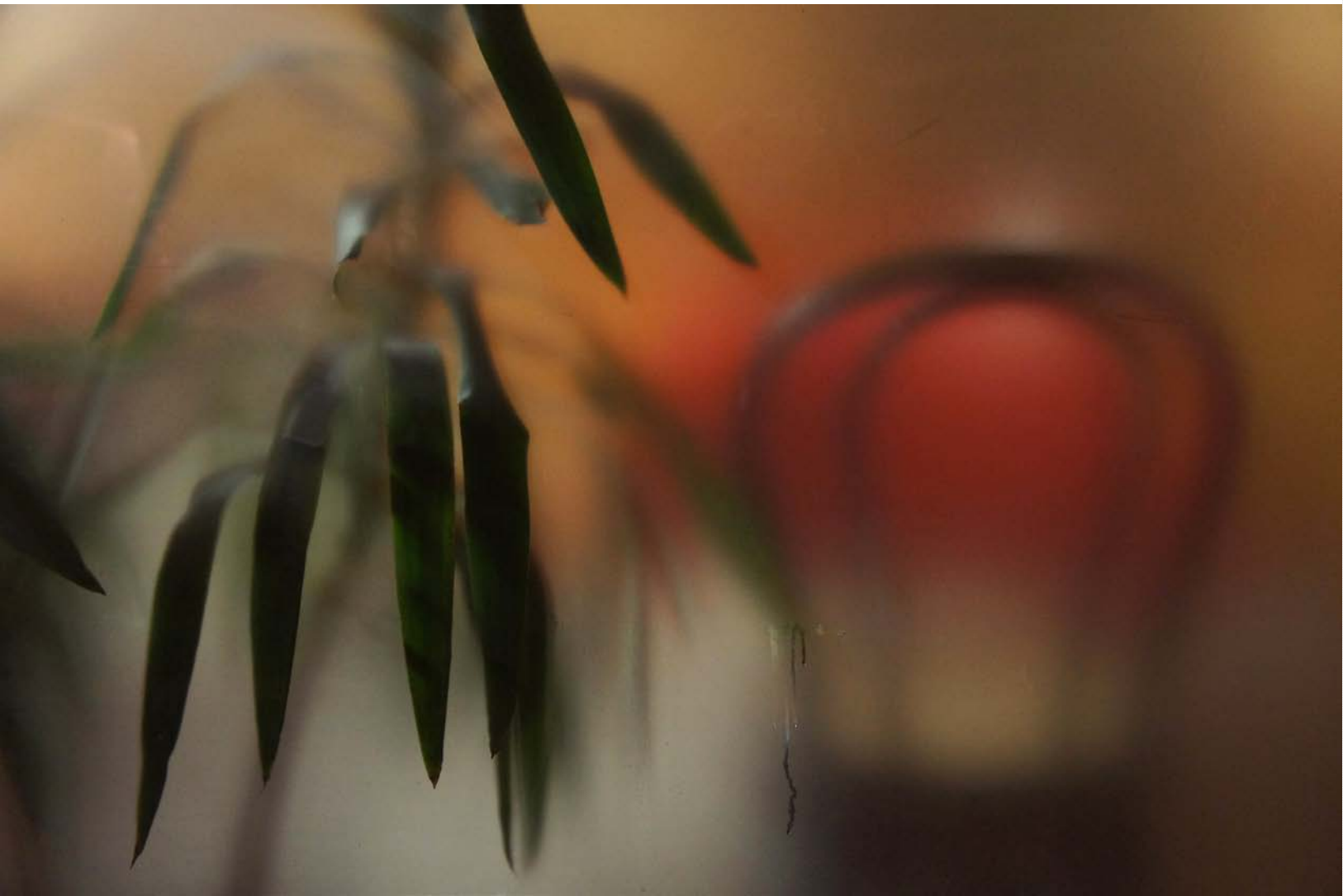
Everything is possible and I am longing for everything.

Jessica Backhaus,
Berlin, June 2012











Jessica Backhaus was born in Cuxhaven, Germany in 1970 and grew up in an artistic family. At the age of sixteen, she moved to Paris, where she later studied photography and visual communications. Here she met Gisele Freund in 1992, who became her mentor. In 1995 her passion for photography drew her to New York, where she assisted photographers, pursued her own projects and lived until 2009.

Jessica Backhaus is regarded as one of the most distinguished voices in contemporary photography in Germany today. Her work has been shown in numerous solo and group exhibitions, including the National Portrait Gallery, London, and the Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin. To date, she has six publications to her name; *Jesus and the Cherries*,

2005, *What Still Remains*, 2008, *One Day in November*, 2008 and *I Wanted to See the World*, 2010, *ONE DAY- 10 photographers*, 2010 and *Once, still and forever*, 2012, all published by Kehrer Verlag, Heidelberg. Her photographs are in many prominent art collections including Art Collection Deutsche Börse, Germany, ING Art Collection, Belgium, Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, USA and the Margulies Collection, Miami, USA.

Jessica Backhaus is represented by Robert Morat Galerie in Hamburg and Berlin, Robert Klein Gallery in Boston, Projektraum Knut Osper in Cologne and Stieglitz 19 Gallery in Belgium.

Based in Berlin, Jessica divides her time and life between Europe and the United States.





... It is only important to know that theory is dead, that I came to announce the dictatorship of light and herbs ... UROS ZUPAN

Looking at the photos of Jessica Backhaus, one is reminded of many things. First of all, of oneself, and then also of works from the history of art. Whatever artists have painted over the centuries – details on the window ledge next to a Madonna and child – or later on in still lifes, they noticed it as humans first, and then as artists. Nothing escapes the eye. The only question is how conscious we are of what we perceive. The things we glimpse for a moment vanish again instantly. On other occasions, though, something we have seen remains in memory; we don't know quite where to place it, but this sight takes on a key function because it opens up gateways into various realms of memory, reaching from childhood to the present.

If you live with someone, you both agree on a certain ordering system. Next to this, there is also an order that the other person might regard as disorder. For example, things are left lying around at random so that they can be seen. Otherwise, you would have to search for them, which can be time-consuming.

Jessica Backhaus focuses her ordering gaze on what is random, on things lying and standing around. She thinks in colors.

She creates sound spaces. The objects are resonating bodies. They activate, structure, orchestrate the sound space.

Jessica Backhaus sees nothing that is out of the ordinary. She doesn't seek it out. That is her strength. She captures what we know, or think we know. Nevertheless, we look closely. For light, shadows, colors and the channel of vision turn things that are familiar to us, or which seem that way, into a memory-enriched finding. This find might contain odors, it might display haptic qualities. Who would dare tear off a sheet hanging off the roll of paper towels on the window ledge that is so suffused with magical, translucent light? (By contrast, there are haloes that are so obtrusive, you would be more than happy to remove them.)

The craftsmen who designed the red-painted ornament of an arrangement of poles did not invent it either. But the way Jessica Backhaus photographs it makes you want to caress it. That, too, is not alien to us: the desire to run our hand over the arches and bends, like the curves of a body.

Source: Uros Zupan, *Immer bleibt das Andere*, Munich 2008, page 8 (English translation by Erica Johnson Debeljak, quoted in *Contemporary Slovenian Poetry: 10 Poets Born Between 1960 and 1969*, Ljubljana, 2008).

The broad brush in the raspberry-colored water in a glass looks frozen. As if someone had forgotten it, left it to hibernate for the winter. But something existential sneaks in here: someone has gone away and not come back. (In December 1990, we found ourselves looking at potential artist's studios in Leipzig as part of a grant, ending up in a factory hall. It was a cold, misty morning; pale ceiling lights illuminated a ghostly scene. Plastic cups were standing on the tables where plastic bags were produced. They were still half-filled with coffee, and there were also personal items left lying around. In the glassed-in supervisor's cabin, framed family photos stood on a ledge. The Vietnamese who worked here must have had only minutes to vacate their workplace forever.)

It's different with the magical order of things: two magnificent ears of strawberry corn, one standing, the other lying on its side, seen from above, on a box with ornamental blue-white décor, look like precious trophies, like artifacts made out of rubies. The answer to a "sacralization" of this sort comes immediately: twelve Pétanque balls are scattered in the sand. Six steel-gray, five brown and one light-colored.

The principle of order and disorder follows that of same and different. Theoretically, Jessica Backhaus could make hundreds of photos like this. But that's not what it's all about. It's about the constellation! Even if the position of the balls betrays no discernible pattern, a configuration still emerges that culminates in a fascination with finality. As if the random dispersion were actually constructed through and through.

The woundwort plant reaching up in glowing yellow from the lower margin of the picture into the almost pitch-black sky has something glassy about it. As with the strawberry corn, the stylization of nature is like an orchestration of gestures that remain forever frozen in time. The history of art once again comes to mind, as when in Renaissance paintings the diaphanously painted flowers seem to emit a sound.

Jessica Backhaus has a gift for solidifying and liquefying. She manages to localize the locationless. Maybe it has something to do with her biography, in which uncertain things are absorbed by certainty. More and more, the viewer is called upon to question what he sees. Although Backhaus exclusively uses the medium of photography, she acts as an artist. Not as an artistic photographer, but as an artist in the traditional sense, sometimes even as a "watercolorist" if one looks at the picture with the light turquoise-blue, slightly blurred background onto which floating leaves in graduated tonalities are "painted" as if with a brush.

Time and again, it is the colors that define a composition. Like in the picture showing bath mats hung over thin ropes to dry. Jessica Backhaus creates such a stringent whole that one might have the impression she experimented for weeks with colors and shapes. When she fine-tunes the size of the photos according to their colors, motif and composition, she likewise acts as an artist, knowing for example just how to bring out a delicate feeling of intimacy.

Jessica Backhaus's discretion is almost proverbial: a continuous understatement, with the result that our associations when looking at her work receive a revitalizing boost. This comes from the way her pictures are different in nature and yet preserve the guise of familiarity, our experience of them thus being at once poetic and informative.

Attesting to this quality is the nighttime image of the moon reflected in the sea. Edvard Munch immediately comes to mind. Many artists have painted this motif. What distinguishes the photo here is the meditative calm it exudes. One more day, and it would have been a full moon. The shimmer of light twists itself layer by layer into and over the sea. – I spoke of color as sound space in the work of Jessica Backhaus. Now, where the darkness of night fills the picture space with a mystical serenity, I think of minimal music, of LaMonte Young, the early Phil Glass, the fluctuating repetition that rocks the listener in a cradle of sound.

Sometimes it takes time to grasp the work of an artist. How often does the attention-grabbing motif stand at the foreground. For Jessica Backhaus, the motif provides an occasion for contemplating the "way of the world," the "order of things" (which disorder makes necessary), for thinking about light and color as generators of life. And there is something else as well, a quiet melancholy that tells us that we cannot change the tides. In other words: that we should follow them instead.

JEAN-CHRISTOPHE AMMANN,
Frankfurt am Main, May 2012

Prof. Dr. Jean-Christophe Ammann was director of the Kunstmuseum Lucerne from 1968–1977, of the Kunsthalle Basel from 1978–1988 and of the Museum für Moderne Kunst in Frankfurt am Main from 1989–2001. Since 1998 he has been a professor at Goethe University, Frankfurt am Main, and he has been responsible since 1999 for the collection of the Deutsche Börse, Eschborn, Frankfurt.





FRONT IMAGE Aline Smithson BACK IMAGE Jessica Backhaus
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